

# MASK

THE OTHER FACE



Bharati Debi  
Anshu Prokash Nandan

# **Mask**

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**Bharati Debi**  
**Anshu Prokash Nandan**

*Sketches*  
**A P Nandan**



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## Foreword

Documentation of both our tangible and intangible cultural heritage remains an important area of academic interest to the anthropologists since long. Tangible aspects of culture encompass expressions and testimony of human creation. These are produced indigenously for specific use and not for marketing. These are closely connected with the history and cultural heritage of a community.

A mask, though apparently a tangible cultural heritage, has many specific socio-cultural and religious functions towards perpetuation of important intangible heritage of culture.

The vast geographical area of India, with her varied cultural backgrounds, does not usually facilitate the people to be conversant with each other's rich heritage. The lack of proper awareness or even inadequate knowledge may lead to a kind of cultural distance.

This brief yet important documented account, put together by Dr Bharati Debi and Shri A.P. Nandan on the types of masks used by different communities in India, along with a brief outline of material used, craftsmanship, geographical distribution and cultural functions of each mask; is an important attempt to highlight traces of unity in Indian culture, in spite of her apparent cultural diversity. Complemented with excellent photographs and illustrations, the book depicts creative excellence of the people of India.

The book aims to inspire people of diverse cultural backgrounds to appreciate each other's culture and also help in increasing awareness about the importance of one's own tangible heritage as a component of national culture.

JAYANTA SARKAR  
Former Jt. Director  
Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata

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## Introduction

Mask is a form of disguise. It is worn to hide the identity of a person and in his place establish a new identity of another being according to the mask's feature. Mask is a replica of face. On some special occasions mask is seen to cover the entire body. It actually acts as an instrument of transfiguration.

As a cultural object, mask has been used throughout the world especially in North and South America, England, France, Greece, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Africa, Mongolia, China, Japan, Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal and India, in all periods since the Stone Age. Mask has had a varied appearance in its use as well as in symbolism. The earliest evidence of mask, however, comes from a Paleolithic cave painting of Trois Freres in southern France, dating back to 30,000 years approximately.

Practically, every material has been used for making a mask. There are masks of gold, silver, copper, brass, bronze, ivory, stone (both precious and common), wood, bamboo splits, plaster, fibre, shell, grass, hay, feather, bark, cane, clay, terracotta, plastic, porcelain, papier mache and simple pigments.

Perhaps direct application of colour on the face to hide

one's own identity preceded the wearing of a mask.

Mask could either be very large and heavy, or even tiny and light weight, depending upon the nature, material and size of a mask. Chinese dragon-mask is so large that it is worn by several persons. Small mask is not worn but used as a symbolic one.

Different characters—visible or invisible, real or imaginary—are represented by mask. Mask recreates popular personalities, animals, monsters, supernatural spirits, deities, totemic beings, comic figures, witches, ghosts, etc.

Making of a mask is often preceded by some religious observations. It can also be prepared by others living in the same social milieu or outside.

Mask plays an important role, whether in amusement and entertainment, or dance, drama, etc. It is associated with ceremonies having religious, social and magical significance. In the tribal society extensive use of mask reveals the magical power of a mask.

The present treatise deals with the kind of masks used in India by the people of rural belt and the tribals in particular.

# Classification

# Classification

Mask may broadly be classified into three categories:

- Mask proper
- Maskette
- Maskoid

**Mask proper** is worn on the face. **Maskette** is used above or below the face, while **Maskoid** is drawn on the face.

Of these, Mask proper is extensively used in India. Maskoids are comparatively rare.

**Maskoids** probably preceded the Mask proper. The painted face of a *kathakali* dancer is a classical example of Maskoid.



Maskoid (Kathakali Dancer, Kerala)



The Siddis of Gujarat, the Bolan Bhaktas of Bardhaman in West Bengal, a section of the Pallis or Vanniyans of Tamil Nadu as well as the Yeravas of Karnataka use **Maskoid**.

The *chho* dancers used Maskoid before the introduction of *chho* masks.



Maskoid (*Siddi*, Gujarat)



Maskoid (*Yerava*, Karnataka)

## Material

## Material

Masks are made of different materials, wood being the one most preferred. Single blocks of wood are hollowed out from inside for the purpose. The other side is carved out meticulously to form a face, with the help of a sharp chisel. Often these masks are seen with holes for the eyes and mouth. Most of such masks are painted.



Wood (*Baiga*, Madhya Pradesh)

The Bhutias, Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khamtis, Gonds, Omanatyas, Rabhas, Marias, Murias, Bhatras, Baigas, Pardhans, Konds, Bhuiyas, Gallongs, Koyas, Santals, Bhils and others use wooden masks.



Wood (*Gond*, Madhya Pradesh)

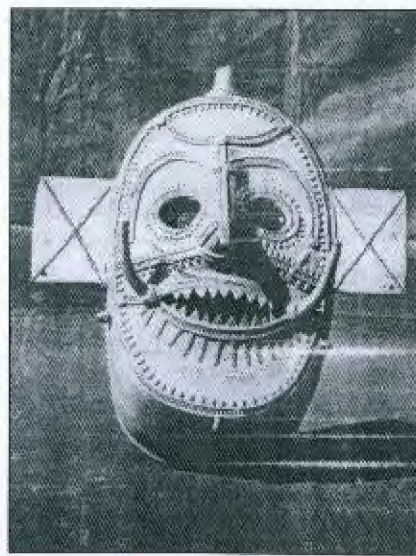


Apart from wooden masks, the Rabhas make another type of mask out of bamboo splits. Fine bamboo splits are woven as per the shape and size of the mask. A piece of white cloth is pasted on one side to obtain a comparatively smooth surface for painting. A piece of wooden keel is fixed in place of nose. Goat's skin is used for crown, ears and tongue. The mask is an integral part of the *Charkhilaini* dance of the forest Rabhas.

Some tribes like the Hill Marias or the Khamtis have utilised the flexibility of metallic foils in the making of mask. The Hill Marias use aluminium while the Khamtis use tin.



Bamboo splits (*Rabha*, West Bengal)



Aluminium (*Hill Maria*, Chhattisgarh)



Tin (*Khamti*, Arunachal Pradesh)

Masks made of simple clay, terracotta and pith are available in some areas of West Bengal.

The Dangs of Gujarat use masks made of bamboo and clay.



Terracotta (West Bengal)



Pith (*Hadi*, West Bengal)



Clay (West Bengal)



Paper pulp, technically known as papier mache, is a very common and extensively-used material for making a mask. It is used in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

Old paper, old cloth, clay, glue and pigments are the simple raw materials used for making such masks.



Papier mache (Uttar Pradesh)



Papier mache (Orissa)



Papier mache (West Bengal)

At first, a crude earthen form of mask is prepared on a plank. It is covered with a thin layer of fine ash to act as a separator. Then paper pulp is affixed with glue one after another in 10 to 12 layers upon the earthen mask and dried in the sun. Next, details of facial features are produced on the paper pulp with the help of a dough of soft clay.

Finally, the mask is covered with a soft piece of cloth dipped in mud and dried in open sun. The mask is then separated from the crude clay mask and finishing work follows.



Gourd (*Muria*, Chhattisgarh)

Masks made out of hard outer cover of ripe gourd are used by the Muria tribesmen in Chhattisgarh.

Muria boys also use masks made of cloth.



Cloth mask of a monstrous bird (*Muria*, Chhattisgarh)



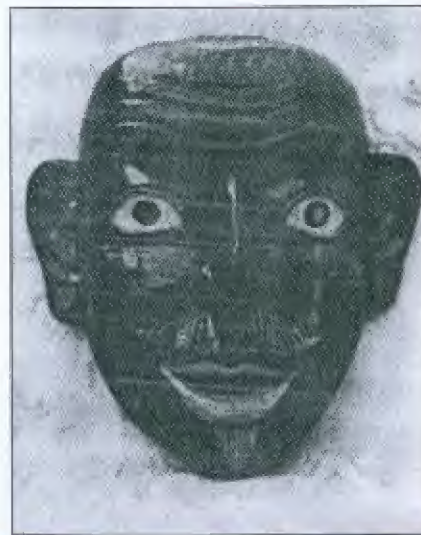
Masks are of different forms—realistic and imaginary.

Realistic forms are either anthropomorphic or zoomorphic.

Anthropomorphic means such masks which suggest human characteristics.



Anthropomorphic (*Gond*, Madhya Pradesh)



Anthropomorphic (*Monpa*, Arunachal Pradesh)



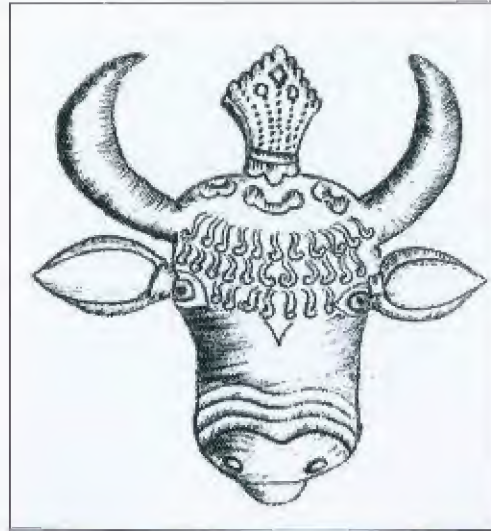
Zoomorphic, Lion (*Gadaba*, Orissa)

Zoomorphic masks are those which attribute animal forms or qualities to a God. Common zoomorphic masks are those of Lion, Tiger, Yak, Rhinoceros and others.

Zoomorphic form of masks are generally used by Gadaba tribes of Orissa, Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh, and in various parts of West Bengal.



Zoomorphic, Rhinoceros (*Gadaba*, Orissa)



Zoomorphic, Yak (*Monpa*, Arunachal Pradesh)



Zoomorphic, Tiger (West Bengal)



Masks of imaginary forms are quite large in number and they take recourse to religion or myth.

The religious aspect is represented by the masks depicting various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Such masks are usually gentle, soft and delicate in form.



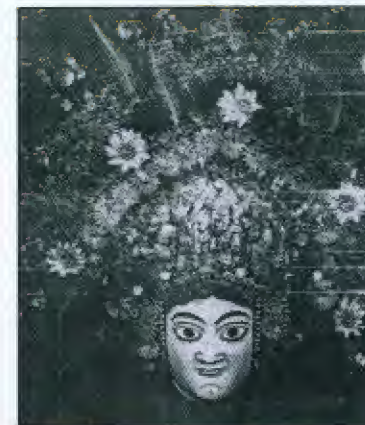
Hanuman (West Bengal)



Shiva (*Poliya*, West Bengal)



Durga (*Poliya*, West Bengal)



Rama (West Bengal)



Devil (*Monpa*, Arunachal Pradesh)

Supernatural spirits also come under the category of religion. Mythical characters reveal the deep-rooted traditional ethos of the people which may be community or religion specific.

There is also some sort of overlapping of myth and religion. For example, mythical characters like Rama or Hanuman have attained the status of god.

Devil, demon, etc. are mythical characters. They are usually grotesque and scary in form.



Mahishasura (West Bengal)



Demon (*Omanatya*, Orissa)



Narasimha (West Bengal)

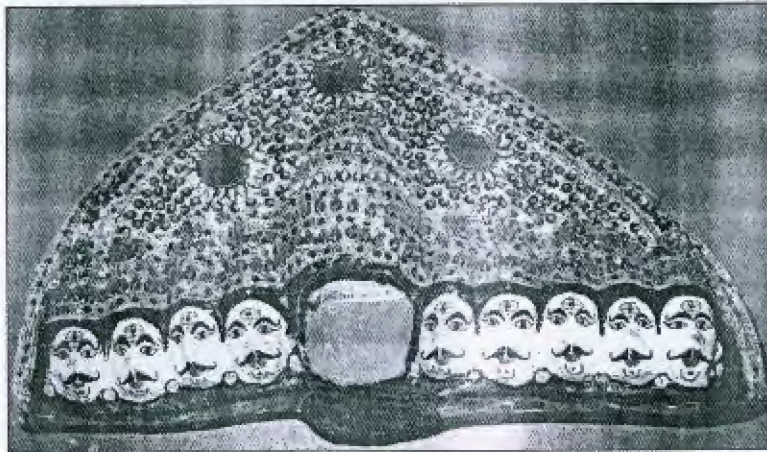


## Size

All masks are not uniform in size.

Mask of Ravana is often of conventional type with ten heads arranged in a row horizontally. It is always large in size.

A mask of Ravana of the Gadabas may range up to 7 feet in width and 4 feet in height.



Ravana (*Gadaba*, Orissa)

## Size

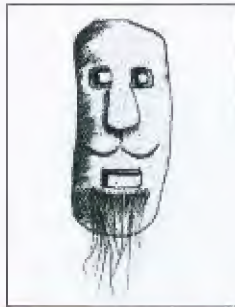


Ravana (West Bengal)

Some masks are even larger and are worn by more than one person at a time.

The lion or yak mask used by the Himalayan tribes like the Ladakhis and Bhutias are good examples of this type.

On the contrary, some masks are miniature in size and used for symbolic purpose only.



Wooden mask (*Muria*, Chhattisgarh)

Some sections of people in Arunachal Pradesh use miniature masks as pendants in their necklace.



Miniature Masks (Arunachal Pradesh)



Ravana (*Poliya*, West Bengal)



Snake Charmer (*Gadaba*, Orissa)



## Play & Game

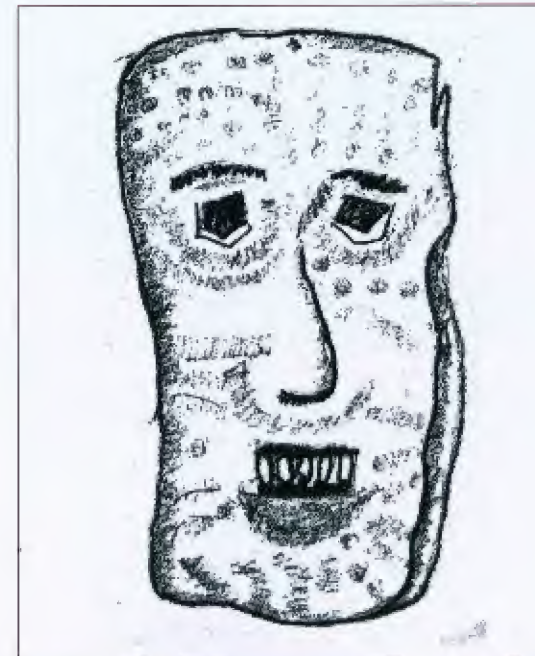
## Play & Game

Mask is an object of recreation. People derive enjoyment out of it.

Its manifestations are observed through games, drama, dance, and other arts.

Children often like to change their identity for fun with the help of masks.

The Juang and Pauri Bhuiya boys wear masks of birds or other animals during their play. Muria boys wear cloth masks to represent frog, panther, monstrous bird or a bison.



Wooden mask (*Baiga*, Madhya Pradesh)

The use of mask in one form or other and for various purposes is by and large associated with all phases of human culture—lithic, tribal, folk, rural or urban.



*Nakta Masks (Muria, Chhattisgarh)*

*Chherta* dance is a great fun for the Muria, Baiga and Gond boys. The leader of dance is called 'Nakta' among the Murias from Chhattisgarh.

He wears a grotesque mask. Hair of *nilgai* or bear is fixed below the mouth to represent beard.

Some masks are decorated with nose made of wax and rings for representing eyes. A shape of mouth is cut and a number of grains are stuck into it to make them look like teeth. A bunch of peacock feathers is tied to the top of the mask.



# Drama

# Drama

Drama is an old and popular form of entertainment. Mask plays an important role in drama.

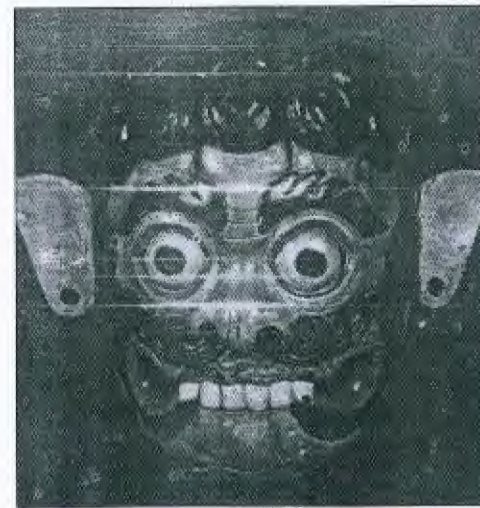
Folk-opera groups of Orissa use wooden masks while staging a play, mostly based on the epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The Dangs use masks of Pancha Pandavas, Ravana or Lord Krishna during theatrical performances or ceremonial occasions like Holi. The Khamtis use a number of masks in the plays based on the Hindu mythology and *Buddha Jataka*.



Sita (Orissa)



Dushan (*Paliya*, West Bengal)



Demon (*Khamti*, Arunachal Pradesh)

Members of the Poliya community stage *Ram Banabas Pala* based on the Ramayana. The non-Aryan characters of the play like Ravana, Khara, Dushana and some animal characters use masks. The actors playing the Aryan characters of Dasharatha, Rama and others do not wear masks during the performance.

In Madurai the folk dancers perform *Devarattam* dance in front of the king's chariot to celebrate his victorious return to homeland. The person leading the dance wears a false beard and mask decorated with shells resembling teeth.



Narasimha (Tamil Nadu)

*Bhagavatha Mela* dance drama, nowadays confined to Mellatur village in Tanjavur district, is held on the occasion of Narasimha Jayanti festival. A young boy wearing the mask of Ganesha appears, dances and blesses the play.

Besides, *Puli Attam* (tiger dance), *Mayil Attam* (peacock dance), *Kalai Attam* (bull dance), *Karadi Attam* (bear dance) and *Vedala Attam* (demon dance) are some of the folk dances performed during village get-togethers.



Ganesha (Tamil Nadu)



## Mask Dance

## Mask Dance

Mask and mask dance are but inseparable. Mask dance, again, is both ritual as well as a non-ritual event. Non-ritual mask dance is usually connected with some festival and meant basically for enjoyment and entertainment.

The Himalayan hill tract from Ladakh to Darjeeling is the homeland of a number of communities like the Ladakhis, Lahaulas, Spitians, Kinnaurese, Bhutias and the Lepchas. Many Tibetans and Nepalese also inhabit this region. The cultural element shared by all of them is the mask dance—both non-ritual and ritual type.



Snow-Lion dance (*Bhutia*, West Bengal)



Yak-dance (*Ladakhi*, Jammu & Kashmir)



Of the non-ritual mask dances, *Singicham* (lion-dance), *Yacham* (yak-dance) and *Mephacham* (peacock-dance) are well known. The dances are based on short stories. In lion-dance and yak-dance, two persons dance under one mask at a time. Synchronisation of their movement requires a lot of expertise and skill.

The internationally famous non-ritual mask dance is the *Chho* dance. It is practised in the border areas of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Purulia in West Bengal is the main centre of *Chho* dance.

*Chho* depicts the stories of great epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Puranas and other ancient literature.



Rama (West Bengal)



Lakshmana (West Bengal)

*Chho* masks are basically made of paper pulp which are later decorated colourfully.

Members of Sutradhar community of village Chorida of Purulia, West Bengal are the main manufacturers of this mask. Originally from Bardhaman, they settled there under the patronage of the landed gentry more than a century ago.

A *Chho* mask is a fine example of folk-art. It is a traditional dance and is a major performing art of the downtrodden.



Kartikeya ( West Bengal)



Parasurama (West Bengal)



Arjuna (West Bengal)



## Festival Dance

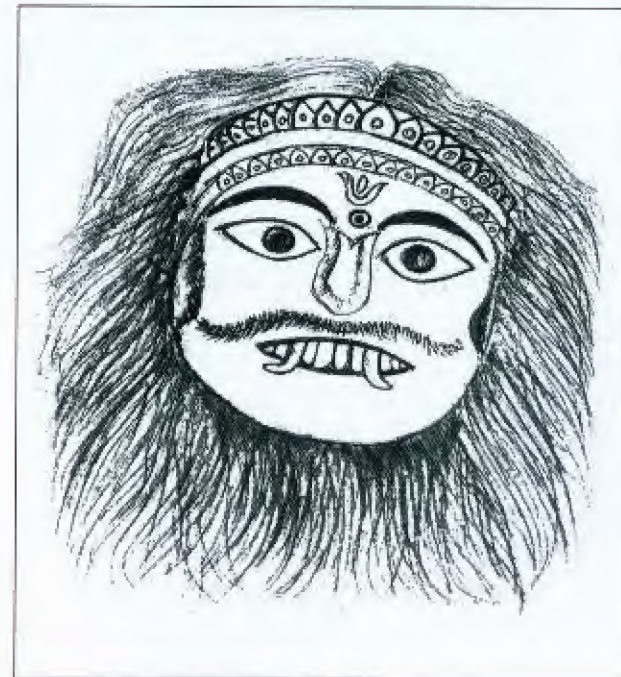
## Festival Dance

Masks at times form a part of dances that are associated with a specific festival in a particular region.

Ravanakata mask dance of Bishnupur in Bankura, West Bengal, is a fine example of festival dance using both ritual and non-ritual mask.

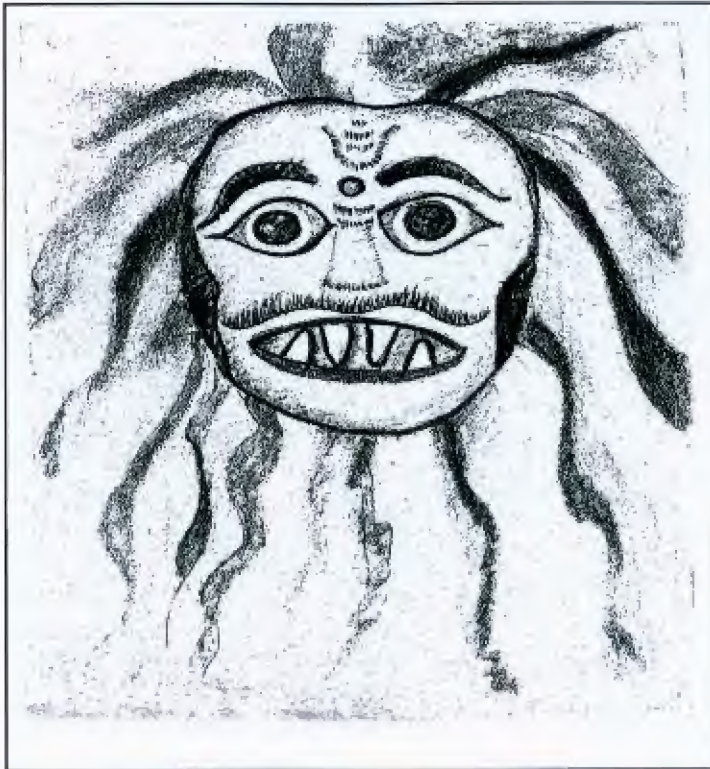
Under the royal patronage of Raghunath Mallodev, the 51st king of Mallo dynasty, the dance was introduced sometimes between AD 1626 and 1656.

Although the idea of the festival owes its origin to Ramlila of northern India, the performance, nevertheless, follows local style and tradition.



Vibhisana (West Bengal)

The dance is held once a year during the festival of 'Durgapuja'. There are six masks altogether.



Hanuman (West Bengal)

Masks of Hanuman, Sugrib, Jambuban and Vibhisana are functional and non-ceremonial in nature.

The masks of Ravana and Indrajit are ceremonial and are preserved inside the temple of god *Raghunath Jeu*.

This performing art is restricted within a few families selected by the king and are hereditary in nature.

The inhabitants of Kullu Valley also perform mask dance during Dussehra festival.



## Ritual Dance

## Ritual Dance

Ritual mask dances are performed in different parts of India.

In Deccan, particularly in Karnataka and Kerala, ritual masks are used for propitiating god. Ritual masks are also used by the Muria, Maria and Bhatra communities of Chhattisgarh.

The *Therayattam* festival of Kerala is a ritual one. It is held to propitiate the gods and demons. The dancers dressed in awe-inspiring costumes and hideous masks, perform weird rituals before the village shrine.

The *Bhawada* dance of the Koknas of Dadra & Nagar Haveli is a ritual dance. Masks of over sixty characters including gods and goddesses are used in this dance. These masks are prepared by members of the community. The dance continues for three days and ends with the sacrifice of a male goat to goddess Bhavani.



Devil (Karnataka)

The *Songee* mask dance of the tribes of Nasik, Maharashtra is also a ritual dance.

*Dhai Chandi* dance of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar is a ritual dance where masks play a dominant role.

The Forest Rabhas practise a mask dance known as Charkhilaini dance to save the villagers from the wrath of *Charkhilaini*, a malevolent deity. The mask is immersed immediately after the dance to avoid any displeasure of the deity.



Charkhilaini dance (*Forest Rabha*, West Bengal)



Chorpagol (*Rabha*, West Bengal)



*Mokha Khail* of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal is a popular dance drama where the actors use mask liberally to represent the dramatic performance of historical, mythological or imaginative stories. Masks of king, queen, ministers, soldiers, court jesters, servants, etc. are used in *Mokha Khail*.

Gamira dance of Dinajpur district in West Bengal is connected with the worship of Lord Shiva. Principal masks used in this ritual dance are of Shiknidhal, Basuli, Chamunda, Mashan Kali, Bura, Buri, Hanuman, Baghmashan and other animals like bear, rhinoceros, etc.



**Basuli (*Poliya*, West Bengal)**



**Shiknidhal (*Poliya*, West Bengal)**



**Baghmashan (*Poliya*, West Bengal)**

*Gambhira* is the famous mask dance of Malda district in West Bengal associated with *gajan* festival or worship of Lord Shiva. The festival is about 1500 years old.

The socio-economically weaker sections of the local population usually indulge in this age old festival.

In order to preserve the ritual sanctity, both the makers and the wearers of the masks observe certain ritualistic restrictions like taking vegetarian diet and the like.



Baghmashan (West Bengal)



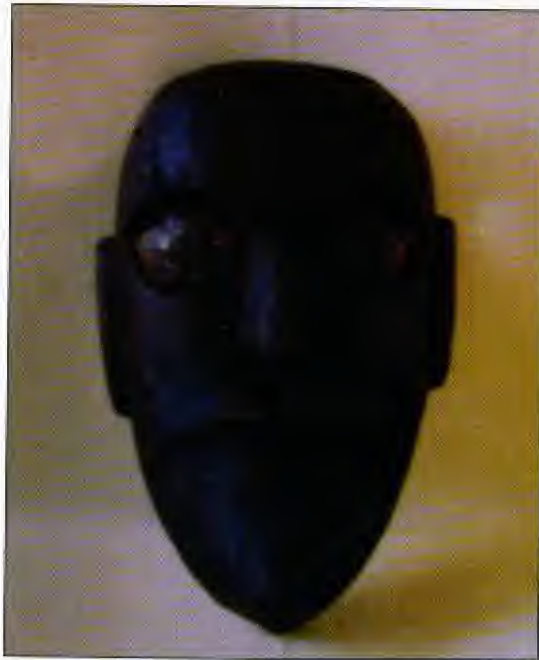
Chamunda Kali (West Bengal)



Narasimha (West Bengal)



Masks of different forms of goddess Kali, namely Raksha Kali, Shyama Kali, Masan Kali and Chamunda Kali are most conspicuous. It is believed that the mask of Kali harbours spiritual powers. Narsinghee, Basuli, Shiva, Parvati, Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Bura, Buri, Bhut, Petni, Rakshasha, Asura and animals like fox, bear, tiger, etc. are represented by masks in this dance.



Bura (*Poliya*, West Bengal)

Efficient carpenters prepare the masks. They observe some religious restrictions in order to avoid displeasure of gods. Painting of the masks is done by traditional painters.

*Gambhira* masks are examples of folk-art.



Buri (*Poliya*, West Bengal)

Mask dances interpreting Buddhist themes are very popular along the Himalayan belt where Mahayana form of Buddhism prevails. Masks were already in use in these regions in connection with shamanistic and witchcraft practices. The monks only incorporate local deities and demons into Buddhist legends and myths. The theme of most of the mask dances is the victory of good over evil.

Devil dance is prevalent among the Ladakhis, Lahaulas, Spitians, Monpas, Sherdukpens, Bhutias, Lepchas and others. The masks are prepared by the Lamas and are preserved in the monasteries.



Mask dancer (*Monpa*, Arunachal Pradesh)

The Lamas themselves perform the dance wearing the fierce-looking masks of devils in the monastery premises during religious festivals, while playing the gong and the trumpet.



Devil dance (*Spitian*, Himachal Pradesh)



*Bhaona* is the performance of traditional Vaishnava drama prevalent in Assam. It was initiated by Sankaradeva, a social and religious reformer of the 15th century. *Rama-vijaya*, a play composed by him, is still played with great devotion. The performance is always preceded by a series of rituals.



Jambubhan (Assam)

The participants use masks to represent different characters. The dance is performed only by bachelors. One of the important austerity measures observed by the performers is eating self-cooked vegetarian food.

*Bhari gan* is an archaic form of folk drama prevalent in some parts of Assam. Heavy wooden masks are used in this drama.

In Andhra Pradesh, certain communities carry the idol of the village deity in a beautifully decorated and painted wooden box. The paintings relate to *yamaloka*, the world of the dead, besides paintings of stories from ancient books. The performer narrates these tales wearing a mask.



Bhasmasur (*Bhil*, Rajasthan)

Use of masks among the Bhils can be traced back to ancient times. There is a strong resemblance between the face mask unearthed at Kalibangan, a Bronze Age site in Rajasthan and some masks of the Bhils living in the same region.

Even today the Bhils wear the mask of Bhasmasur during Garva dance to appease Lord Shiva.



*Pus Kolang dancing mask (Muria, Chhattisgarh)*

The Muria *chelik* (young unmarried boy) prepares his masks, cloths and toys for the *Pus Kolang* or *Chait Dandar* dances, which are ritualistic in nature.

These dances are over-shadowed by the fear of catastrophic penalty, even death, that is believed to come upon the performers in case of any irregularity.

The Gadabas of Orissa perform snake-dance based on mythological stories based on two great Hindu epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.



The Lahaulas dance with a wooden mask of snake god to cure patients of snakebite.

The Angami and Konyak Nagas use painted grotesque masks made of bamboo bark, to protect houses from the wrath of the spirit causing illness.



Snake charmer (*Gadaba*, Orissa)

The folk-dancers of Ganjam district in Orissa take out a procession known as *Thakurani Yatra*. Dancers dressed in the masks of tiger, bull and horse go on dancing before the procession.



Snake god (*Lahaula*, Himachal Pradesh)

## Decoration

## Decoration

A lot of time and effort goes into the making of masks. Immense dedication, religious sentiment and excitement is combined into making of each and every single mask.



Kirat and Kiratni (West Bengal)

Some of the masks are classical examples of the workmanship coupled with aesthetics of the rural and tribal people.

Nowadays, such type of masks often decorate the drawing rooms of urban elites.



## Others

## Others

There are other uses of mask. Death mask is not customary in India. Industrial or surgical masks have specific areas of use. Cosmetic mask is adored by the young generation in particular for personal beautification.

These apart, there is a unique use of mask and that too on the back of the head covering the neck.

The woodcutters, honey collectors and the fisher-folks of Sunderbans have to move in deep forests infested by Royal Bengal tigers for their sustenance. On the basis of their study of the behavioural pattern of tigers, they have devised a way to camouflage their neck. It is said that tigers normally pounce on their prey from the back. The woodcutters, honey collectors and the fisher-folk wear a mask of plastic or rubber on the rear side of their head to befool the tiger.

This method, however, is not fool proof.



Rear mask (*Fisher folks, West Bengal*)

## Appendix

### Communities and States

<u>Community</u>	<u>State</u>	<u>Community</u>	<u>State</u>
Angami Naga	Nagaland & Manipur	Ladakhi	Jammu & Kashmir
Baiga	Madhya Pradesh	Lahaula	Himachal Pradesh
Bhatra	Chhattisgarh	Lepcha	West Bengal
Bhil	Rajasthan	Maria	Chhattisgarh
Bhuiya	Orissa	Monpa	Arunachal Pradesh
Bhutia	West Bengal	Muria	Chhattisgarh
Bolan Bhakta	West Bengal	Nepalese	West Bengal
Dang	Gujarat	Omanatya	Orissa
Gadaba	Orissa	Palli	Tamil Nadu
Gallong	Arunachal Pradesh	Pardhan	Madhya Pradesh
Gond	Madhya Pradesh	Poliya	West Bengal
Hadi	West Bengal	Pauri Bhuiya	Orissa
Hill Maria	Chhattisgarh	Rabha	West Bengal
Juang	Orissa	Santal	West Bengal
Khamti	Arunachal Pradesh	Sherdukpen	Arunachal Pradesh
Kinnaurese	Himachal Pradesh	Siddi	Gujarat
Kokna	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	Spitian	Himachal Pradesh
Kond	Orissa	Tibetan	West Bengal
Konyak Naga	Nagaland & Manipur	Vanniyan	Tamil Nadu
Koya	Orissa	Yerava	Karnataka





Masks have been used since ancient times for religious, cultural and entertainment purposes. An essential element in many rituals and festivals, the mask extends its power and mystery for the wearer as well as the audience.

This interesting book brings together the various types of masks used in the different states of India. Complemented with colourful illustrations, it presents the art of making, wearing and acting a mask as can be seen in the rituals and ceremonies of various communities in India.

**Bharati Debi** retired as an anthropologist from the Anthropological Survey of India in 2004. She has done extensive research on middle class women in Kolkata. Dr Bharati Debi has also co-authored many books on field investigations among the tribes and castes, as well as among the rural and urban people.

**Anshu Prokash Nandan** served the Anthropological Survey of India as an anthropologist for more than three decades. He has published the first ethnographic survey of Nicobarese living on the island. Shri Nandan has also contributed a number of articles on the life of tribes in India in various journals and books.



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